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ABSTRACT

An examination of the Ancient Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone shows how much can be learned about the culture in which it was produced and circulated. The reader can make a number of inferences about the relative positions and roles of men and women in ancient Greek society and what traits were considered positive in each. Six modern versions of the myth written for children offer the same opportunities to the critic. Unfortunately, the inferences to be made are disturbing. All of these modern versions give Zeus more credit for caring about the human race and for solving the problem at hand than he receives in the Homeric hymn. Furthermore, all the children's versions portray Demeter and Persephone as basically one dimensional characters, whereas the Homeric version portrays them as multi-dimensional. According to the modern versions, women are intelligent and mean or are kind but incapable of thinking for themselves. These versions teach children that women are to be subservient. They imply that while being a mother is an important role for women, it is not a role that requires strength. Women who show anger, they suggest, do themselves a disservice. Whereas the Homeric hymn showed the goddesses as well-rounded--having good qualities and bad qualities, children's versions of the myth severely limit the goddesses. Greek society devalued women in general, but 20th centure retellings for children devalue women even more than the original. (TB)

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"Demeter and Persephone: What Our Children Are Learning"

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Myths provide us with information on different cultures. By studying the myths of a culture we can learn the values, concerns, and practices of that culture. As adults we are fortunate to be able to read myths that have been translated as directly as possible from their original language. Children, however, do not have this same opportunity. They must depend on adults to rewrite the myths in a way that they can understand. Their generalizations of the culture, therefore, are made through the filter of adult views and values. This can result in children receiving messages about a culture that the original tellers of the myths never intended to give. As we study and teach our children myths of other cultures, we need to ask ourselves, "How faithful to the original(s) are we being?"

The story of Demeter and Persephone offers an example of this issue. "Homeric Hymn to Demeter" (2) gives us a fairly detailed account of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone. From this myth several conclusions can be made about the views and values of ancient Greek society. One of the most obvious conclusions to draw is that beauty was important to the Greeks. Throughout the myth are numerous references to the beauty of both Demeter and Persephone. But more than just telling us that beauty is important, the myth tells us what features the Greeks considered as beautiful. Demeter is often referred to as "Demeter of the beautiful hair" or "Demeter of the beautiful crown". Since Demeter is described as having golden hair, we may conclude that golden hair was a feature

of beauty. Likewise, Persephone is regularly called "Persephone of the lovely ankles". Thus we can conclude that ankles were also admired by the Greeks. Finally, there are several references to "deep-bosomed" women leading us to believe that large breasts were also admired. On the other hand, when Demeter disguises herself as an old woman, we learn that old-age is associated with sorrow and lack of beauty. Perhaps that is why there is sorrow!

However, the myth tells us of more than just the importance of beauty. It also tells us the roles of women. One of the first things we learn is that women--even goddesses--are not considered as important as men by the male gods. Zeus has no qualms about giving Persephone, his daughter, to Hades. He also apparently doesn't think it necessary to consult with Demeter about this decision, even though she is Persephone's mother. We also see how males are favored over females by the reference to Demophoon being "an only son, born late, a darling long prayed for" (Morford, 279). Thus we can conclude that, in the eyes of men at least, most women's roles were secondary ones. Furthermore, it is women, rather than men, who come to the aid of Demeter. Hecate is the one who approaches Demeter about the disappearance of Persephone. Also, it is the daughters of Celeus who take pity on Demeter when she is disguised as an old woman. This is not to say that **all** roles held by women were secondary in importance. As we shall see in this myth, women also had some very important roles. The goddesses were not without a certain amount of power and control that could be used in their favor if so needed.

One of the major roles of women was that of mothering. An obvious

example is that of Demeter's strong attachment to Persephone--especially when compared to the lack of attachment by Zeus towards Persephone. This role is also shown by Demeter nursing Demophoon, and once again when the four daughters take "loving" care of Demophoon and Metaneira after Demeter leaves. In a much more subtle way the role of mother is shown through what Demeter has dominion over. She is the goddess of crops; thus, it is through her that nature flourishes and grows. She "mothers" the earth to provide for a harvest that sustains earth life. When she is happy, earth and its inhabitants flourish. While perhaps this role is little thought of by the gods, there is no doubt as to the importance of Demeter's role in giving and sustaining life on earth. This is a point that is not lost on the gods at the end of the myth. Another part of her role as mother to the earth is to teach. Therefore, at the end of the myth, she teaches her "mysteries" to the kings so that they can learn how to harvest the earth. Finally, the barren land caused by Demeter's sorrow can be seen as representative of the sorrow caused a woman by a barren womb. This is further stressed by the fact that Demeter's sorrow is caused by the loss of her daughter.

Another insight gained from this myth is that the gods do not always exemplify "positive" traits. Hades seems to consistently use shady means to obtain what he wants. When he decides he wants to marry Persephone, he goes to Zeus and together they arrange a plan to kidnap her. Later in the text there is a hint that he might have done more than just kidnap her. When Demeter is questioning Helius about what he might have seen she says, "I heard the piercing cry of the girl . . . as though she were being violated" (Morford, 277). Hades also ensures, by force, that

Persephone will come back to live with him after Zeus requests that she be sent back to her mother. Persephone tells her mother that "Hades swiftly put in my mouth the fruit of the pomegranate . . . and compelled me to eat it by force against my will" (Morford, 286). The fact that Zeus is willing to deceive his sister and lover as well as his daughter doesn't say much for his character either. Even when Persephone cries out for him to help her, calling him father, he seems quite unaffected. And his request for Hades to return Persephone has nothing to do with the sorrow felt by Persephone or Demeter; rather, it is because of all the trouble Demeter is causing to the humans and the gods. He doesn't want to make Demeter happy; he wants to stop her from allowing everything to be destroyed.

Finally, we come to the negative aspects of Demeter. As loving as Demeter is towards Persephone, she is equally as angry and wrathful towards Zeus. Several passages mention her anger and the lengths to which she is willing to go to seek revenge upon Zeus. This hymn states, "Now she would have destroyed the entire human race by cruel famine and deprived those who have their homes on Olympus of their glorious prestige from their gifts and sacrifices" (Morford, 282). Later it says, "And Demeter far away brooded over her designs to thwart the actions of the blessed gods" (Morford, 283). Continuing on in that same passage, Argus says:

> . . . father Zeus has ordered me to bring to him from Erebus
> august Persephone, so that her mother may see her with
> her own eyes and desist from her wrath and dread anger
> against the immortals. For she is devising a great scheme
> to destroy the feeble tribes of earth-born men by keeping

> the seed hidden under earth and ruining the honors that are bestowed on the immortals. She clings to her dire wrath and does not associate with the gods but remains on the rocky citadel of Eleusis sitting apart within her fragrant temple (Morford, 283).

It would seem that Demeter's anger is justifiable considering the fact that her brothers arranged to have her daughter kidnaped. However, this anger is taken out on the mortals more than on Zeus or Hades. Furthermore, she also shows her angry temper when confronted by Metaneira about placing Demophoon in the fire.

Demeter is also portrayed as a vain god. At one point she says, "I am Demeter, esteemed and honored as the greatest benefit and joy to mortals and immortals" (Morford, 281). She then has the mortals build a temple for her.

However, not all of the attributes of Demeter are negative. She is also portrayed as strong. She will not be persuaded by all the different gods sent by Zeus to appeal to her. She is not willing to give in to Zeus, and eventually he knows that he must give in to her if the human race is to be preserved. Her strong personality, strengthened by her anger, allows her to win out over Zeus. Furthermore, according to this Homeric hymn it is Demeter, and not Zeus, who comes up with the arrangement for Persephone to spend one third of the year with Hades and two thirds of the year with Demeter. She then proposes this arrangement to Zeus who agrees.

Persephone also is given a positive trait other than just being beautiful. Many times she is referred to as "wise Persephone". This idea is backed up by the fact that Hades must **force** her to eat the pomegranate as opposed to tricking her into eating it. Nor does she absent-mindedly eat the fruit (as some children's versions suggest).

Finally, this myth also tells us how humans were thought of in relation to the gods. From this myth we know that the Greek people thought that the gods were much wiser and more important than humans. This is seen by the fact that it does not bother Demeter to let the humans suffer in order to exact her revenge on Zeus. It is also shown by the statements concerning what would happen if Demeter were to keep the earth barren. If the humans were to die off, there would be no one left to offer gifts and sacrifices to the gods. Other than that, the gods were not much concerned with the people on earth. Finally, Demeter says, "Mortals are ignorant and stupid who cannot foresee the fate both good and bad that is in store" (Morford, 281).

Despite many of the unflattering characteristics of the gods, we do not necessarily dislike any of them. If nothing else, they are well rounded and, therefore, believable and easier to understand.

We can learn many things about Greek society from the Demeter-Persephone myth. However, our children are not learning the same things. Although children's versions of this myth offer some of the same conclusions of Greek society that the Homeric hymn does, there are also some major differences. Some leave out information that offers important

insights, and others add things that change the perspective. By looking at six different children's versions of this myth, we can see what our own culture has transposed onto these myths and what Greek ideas have been left intact for our children to learn about.

The first version is Two Queens of Heaven by Doris Gates. Like the Homeric version, this one too perpetuates the idea that beauty is important and links that beauty with golden hair. Of Demeter Gates writes, ". . . out of her face shone the beauty of contentment and fulfillment" (Gates, 74). Not only does this version suggest that beauty is important, it also suggests that Demeter received her beauty because she was content with the roles assigned to her. Furthermore, old age is once again associated with sorrow and ugliness. Also brought up in this version is the idea of the importance of mothering. "Unlike the other Olympians, who for the most part took a casual view of their parenthood, Demeter loved her daughter with all the warmth and devotion of a human mother," says Gates (Gates, 74). We also see Demeter fulfilling the role of mother as nurse to Demophoon. Thus, mother earth is the divine example for human mothers to emulate.

Other parts of the myth that follow the Homeric Hymn include Zeus arranging for Hades to kidnap Persephone, the building of the temple to Demeter, and the lesser quality of humans (in this case humans are too impatient). Things get interesting, however, in how the two versions differ. In the version by Gates, Demeter has less knowledge and less control over things. She doesn't know that Zeus is involved with the kidnaping. Nor does she set the terms by which she and Persephone will

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get to stay together. Zeus is the all-powerful god who takes care of everything. Also, Hades tries to persuade Persephone to eat the seeds. Then, reads Gates, "almost idly, she plucked out a seed and put it into her mouth" (Gates, 87). No longer is Persephone wise, but rather she is weak and easily persuaded. The women in this version definitely have less strength than the men.

The relationship between Zeus and Hades is also much different in this version. While they are both portrayed as having a definite negative side in the Homeric Hymn, in this version they are at odds with each other at the end of the myth. Hades persuades Persephone to eat the seeds in order to get the better of Zeus after Zeus has ordered Persephone's return. Zeus, in response, accuses Hades of tricking him and then seeks for a compromise in order to nobly save the human race. The myth is no longer about how Zeus and Hades deceived Demeter and Persephone. It is now about a power struggle between Zeus and Hades.

By switching the focus like this, many of the strong attributes of Demeter and Persephone are lost. Hades is portrayed as a much more bitter god, Zeus is much more caring of the human race and for much nobler reasons, Persephone is an even flatter character, and Demeter's only positive attribute is her good mothering instincts.

The next version of the story is Persephone Bringer of Spring by Sarah F. Tomaino. Once again beauty and mothering are important focuses in the story. Unfortunately, that is where the similarities between.the two versions end. Although we do see Demeter angry in this version, it

is at the land rather than at Zeus. Demeter thinks Persephone has drowned and curses the land for not saving her.

Where we see the greatest difference, though, is in the relationship between Persephone and Hades. In this version, Persephone tastes the four seeds in order to please Hades. Then, with tears in her eyes, she begs permission to leave and promises to return to him. Hades loves her dearly and therefore allows her to leave. Persephone remembers her promise and returns for part of each year. The character of Persephone has been dramatically altered from the Homeric Hymn. Instead of being wise, she is subservient. Unlike the Homeric Hymn which describes her as both innocent and wise, Tomaino implies that an innocent young girl must also be unable to have a multi-dimensional character. Also introduced into this version are jewels given to Persephone by Hades. Appropriately, Persephone refuses this gift, thus implying that one should not be bought by jewels. Unfortunately, the only thing one gets out of this version is a very sketchy skeleton of the myth surrounded by a sappy story. A child reading this version would not be able to learn much about the Greek culture or the values of the Greek people.

The third version is from Greek Gods and Heroes by Alice Low. In this version, golden hair and beauty are briefly mentioned, but the focus is on Persephone's high-spirit and sunny face. Although there is no mention of a conspiracy between Zeus and Hades, we do see Demeter's anger. "Then Demeter became stony and angry, and she caused the earth to suffer with her" (Low, 42). Once again, characters and actions are altered. Hades is softened by his offering jewels to Persephone--which she

declines--and by sweetly giving her the seeds--which she eats. Also, Zeus is once again credited with solving the problem on his own. He hears the loud wailing of Demeter and Persephone when Persephone must return to the underworld and compromises by saying that she must spend one month with Hades for each of the four seeds she ate. Once again women are portrayed as irrational, emotional beings incapable of coming up with solutions for problems.

The fourth version is from Greek Myths by Olivia Coolidge. Beauty and golden hair are once again mentioned. Also repeated is the idea that Persephone is persuaded by Hades to eat the seeds. Mothering is focused on as well. Says Coolidge, "She was a goddess whom men called the great mother because of her generosity in giving" (Coolidge, 28). We also read that the "sight of little children and happy mothers gave her pain" (Coolidge, 31). Furthermore, we don't see Demeter as an angry goddess in this version. When she learns of the conspiracy between Zeus and Hades, Demeter "[falls] into deep despair" (Coolidge, 30). And when Metaneira snatches her son from the fire, Demeter is merely indignant.

One thing interesting to note is that this is the first children's version so far to suggest that humans were important to the gods because of the sacrifices they offered. "Even the offerings to the gods were neglected by despairing men who could no longer spare anything from their dwindling stores" (Coolidge, 33). But even so, it is a much subtler hint than the one found in the Homeric Hymn. In this version, the focus is on the humans who couldn't offer sacrifices to their beloved gods.. The Homeric Hymn, on the other hand, focuses on how the gods were concerned

about the ability of humans to offer them gifts and sacrifices. Finally, in this version neither Demeter nor Zeus comes up with the compromise of where Persephone should stay. Rather the law just exists.

The fifth version is from Greek Gods and Heroes by Robert Graves. In this version there is no mention of beauty. Furthermore, the role of mother has been changed to that of nurse regarding Demeter and a human child. Several other things are different as well, including the role of Zeus. In this version Persephone, is his niece rather than his daughter. (Although technically she is **both.**) Also, Zeus answered neither yes nor no when Hades asked for Persephone but instead winked at him. Hades too is portrayed much differently. His character is not a harsh one. In this version Hades comes to Zeus and says, "I have fallen in love with your niece Persephone, Demeter's daughter. May I have your permission to marry her?" (Graves, 28). Also, rather than force Persephone to eat the fruit, in this version Hades kindly suggests that she go home only to find out that she has already eaten the fruit on her own.

One thing that is the same as in the Homeric Hymn is Demeter's anger. When Demeter finds out what happened to Persephone, she says, "My brother Zeus must have plotted this! . . . I will be revenged on him" (Graves, 29). Because Zeus is worried that mankind will die, he sends down the different gods to talk to Demeter. However, there is no mention of ulterior motives for his concern. To the gods Demeter says, "I shall do nothing for any of you, ever, until my daughter comes home to me!" (Graves, 29). Finally, when Hades tells Demeter that Persephone ate seven of the seeds, Demeter screams "If she goes I shall never lift my curse

from the earth, but let all men and animals die!" (Graves, 30). In the end Rhea and Demeter decide that Persephone should marry Hades and spend seven months of the year--one month for each seed she ate--below with him. Demeter then tells Triptolemus to teach the people about harvest.

Although this version shows the anger and determination of Demeter, her character is still one dimensional. The loving and nurturing side of her is left out. In fact, the most significant example of mothering is when Rhea, Demeter's mother, persuades Demeter to come up with a compromise concerning Persephone and Hades. Also, Hades and Zeus are shown in a much better light than in the Homeric Hymn. Hades is kind, gentle and deeply in love with Persephone--only wanting what is best for her. Zeus doesn't really take part in any conspiracy--because he is afraid of Demeter's anger--and he is genuinely worried about the mortal race. Thus we see the men displaying more positive qualities and the women displaying more negative qualities--which is very interesting considering that this is a myth about the goddess.

The final children's version comes from Book of Greek Myths by the d'Aulaires. In this version, Persephone is mentioned as lovely but there is no emphasis on physical beauty. The loving instincts of Demeter, however, are focused on. Demeter is described as unable to bare being without Persephone. Therefore, she kept Persephone always with her--whether on earth or Olympus. Demeter is also shown as the teacher. Because she was a kind goddess and didn't want mankind to starve, she taught humans how to harvest the crops. However, Demeter is not portrayed as completely soft. The d'Aulaires do make one mention of Demeter's anger

at Hades. Persephone, once again, has been reduced to a lovely girl who rejects Hades' offer of jewels, but then absently eats the seeds on her own.

Zeus also is portrayed once again in a different light than in the Homeric Hymn. He plays no part in Persephone's kidnaping. Furthermore, he nobly saves the world from perishing and then decides that mother and daughter shouldn't be separated. He therefore says that Persephone must only spend one month with Hades for each of the seeds she ate.

As we can see, there are several things that are consistent in all of the children's versions. All of the versions give Zeus more credit for caring about the human race and for solving the problem at hand than he receives in the Homeric Hymn. Furthermore, all the children's versions portray Demeter and Persephone as basically one dimensional characters, whereas the Homeric version portrays them as multi-dimensional. According to the children's versions women are intelligent and mean or are kind but incapable of thinking for themselves. From these versions children learn that women are to be subservient. Many of these versions also imply that while being a mother is an important role for women, it is not a role that requires strength. In fact it almost seems that strength is **not** a characteristic of a good mother. They also learn that to show anger makes them appear in a very negative way. Women should be perfect in their roles and show no emotions other than love and sorrow. They also give the impression that men or, in a few cases, bitter women are the only ones who can solve problems.

Whereas the Homeric Hymn showed the goddesses as well rounded--having good qualities and bad qualities, children's versions of this myth severely limit the goddesses. Greek society devalued women in general, but our twentieth century retellings for children devalue women even more than the originals. Although the retellers are probably unaware of this, the results are damaging all the same. While the goddesses might not have been as powerful or as important as the gods, they were by no means inconsequential. Furthermore, like the gods they were multi-dimensional in their characteristics, importance, and power. Our children are surely suffering in their understanding of Greek culture by not having more fully developed versions of this, and doubtless other, Greek myths.

Thus, once again we ask the question "How faithful to the original(s) are we?" Based on the versions looked at, the answer would have to be that we are not very faithful. This is truly unfortunate for our children. Due to these versions and others like them, children reading them will grow up with inaccurate ideas of Greek culture, values, and ancient society. Because of this, these myths have been turned into mere stories.

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